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Smoke and Mirrors

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smoke and mirrors

BY DEVON O'BRIEN DESIGN MACKENZIE FERGUSON PHOTO KAIT MCKINNEY

*With Colorado and Washington passing amendments to
legalize the recreational use of marijuana in this past election,
it's no dispute that the drug is on the rise.*

**Names have been changed for confidentiality purposes*

The incessant beeping of an alarm clock begins at 6 a.m. each day. Molly* fills her backpack and heads to the campus office where she works until 10 a.m. when she switches over to classes. Come 2 p.m. she is free of lecture halls but has to either return to work or go to the library to do her homework for the night. Molly grabs dinner on her way home, walks into the house and tosses her backpack aside as she settles into the couch, flips on Netflix and announces, "I'm gonna get high."

In the past election, voters in Colorado and Washington legalized marijuana for recreational use, adding to the 24 states that have decriminalized marijuana, legalized medical marijuana or both. Although Iowa has not seen legalization of marijuana on its ballot yet, law enforcement officers from the Central Iowa Drug Task Force and the Iowa State Police Division say it is the most commonly confiscated drug in Ames. Sixty-eight out of 100 Iowa State University students surveyed by Ethos say they have tried marijuana and 37 of those people use it at least once per month.

Marijuana is the most commonly used illegal substance in the Ames area. Reports from the Drug Task Force, a multi jurisdictional task force covering Story, Boone and Greene counties, show that 14,740 grams of marijuana were confiscated in 2011. That's 200 times the amount of cocaine, meth and mushrooms confiscated combined and 67 percent more than was found in 2010.

Legalize High

A car pulls down the driveway where Ryan* and his friend anxiously await the night ahead. His friend started smoking pot recently and Ryan's curiosity was growing. They pack into a car stocked with cold sodas and snacks and head out to the edge of a cornfield. Ryan lifts the bowl, lights it and sucks in a huge breath of smoke.

"I didn't know what I was doing. I burnt out my chest and couldn't stop coughing and coughing, but then I pushed down on my chest and it stopped burning. It felt cold. I started looking at everything, the lights, and it was just strange in a way I can't describe," says Ryan. "I liked it so much I convinced [my friend] to sell me what he had left at the end of the night."

Ryan is a recent graduate of Iowa State University and has been smoking marijuana for the past six years. Like Molly, an ISU student and former marijuana dealer, Ryan enjoys smoking recreationally. Both believe that marijuana should be legalized for recreational use across the country.

"I've aced tests high, I've done job interviews high, I've pretty much been high for six years straight—I find it to be more therapeutic than disruptive."

"The first time I smoked, I felt like I had been lied to; everyone said that it was this horrible thing and it really wasn't. Everyone thinks it's so intoxicating, but it isn't. That's what people don't understand," explains Ryan. "I've aced tests high, I've done job interviews high, I've pretty much been high for six years straight—I find it to be more therapeutic than disruptive."

The pair agrees that the drug itself is not the source of any associated problems, it's the fact that it is lumped together with more destructive and addictive drugs. Being illegal means users have to go to a dealer who, in most cases, is selling other illegal drugs. When the dealer gets a marijuana sale they are likely to then mention the other illegal drugs on hand and try to spark an interest in the buyer so more money can be made.

"When you start dealing with weed, you get involved with a lot of other things too," says Molly. "Weed is a gateway drug, I'm not going to deny it. It leads to the accessibility and connection to other drugs."

The illegal status of marijuana attaches a stigma of fear and danger to the drug. Molly says she has experienced some discrimination from other students for being a self-proclaimed stoner. She has been at parties where she will smoke and says there is immediately a "shift in the energy of the room," people get nervous and uncomfortable.

"I think a lot of people associate smoking with dirty, and I get that but it's not as dirty as smoking a cigarette. People think scums of the earth do it," says Molly. "Be more open minded—[stoners] aren't less than you. [Smoking weed] is a personal choice, just like drinking or smoking a cigarette."

smoking etiquette

- The owner of the weed in question gets the first hit.
- Take one hit in rotation, then pass to the left.
- Learn how to use a lighter before you smoke with other people.
- Corner the bowl so you don't burn everything in it at once.
- Always tie your hair back, especially when smoking outside on a windy day.
- Be appreciative when someone smokes you up. One gram of weed costs \$20, just like a bottle of liquor costs \$20.
- Don't use a middle man unless you are buying at least an eighth.
- Don't make someone smoke more than they are comfortable with, especially for an amateur.
- If you are smoking someone else's weed, offer to contribute if you have some with you.
- Don't complain about the quality of someone else's weed.
- Don't bug someone to smoke if you never provide the weed.



Keep it Criminal

A team of undercover officers approach a trailer in an Ames neighborhood, search warrant in hand. The trailer is worn down, unkempt, dirty. The opening of the door reveals a carpet of pest feces and old, moldy food fills the sinks. The officers move cautiously across the room, wary that at anytime they could fall through the floor. The sewage has been broken for weeks and buckets filled with human waste are strewn across the living room. The residents inside don't even notice or care, they are strung out and that's what's most important.

This is a typical scene in a day in the life of Sgt. Scott Kickbush, director of the Central Iowa Drug Task Force. Kickbush's job is to crack down on drugs in Central Iowa. He sees it all with large drug busts being at the core of what he does; entering situations like these is why Kickbush believes marijuana is a gateway drug. He has never done a drug search on a house and not found marijuana and related paraphernalia.

Through interviews he has done with youth in schools to find the root of drug problems, he finds that most substance abusers start with marijuana, and when that doesn't cut it anymore they move to something else, something harder.

Kickbush believes that if and where marijuana is legalized, growers will still run illegal operations and sell their product under the table to users to beat the market price. This is where the tax argument comes into play. While legalizing marijuana makes it open for taxation, Kickbush has found that for every one legal drug operation, there are 100 more illegal ones.

"People here just want to sit around, roll a joint and share it with their friends but they don't see how it affects everything."



"If you want to make money, high-grade marijuana is the best way to do it. You can sell it for \$3000-3500 a pound. For the dealers, that's the biggest draw to it, you can make so much money so fast," says Kickbush. "That's never going to change, people are going to undercut people, it's no different than selling counterfeit bags and jewelry from China out in New York."

For some dealers, that is the only draw to it. The Drug Task Force arrested an ISU student who had never used marijuana but was dealing it in high volume. The student drove to Wyoming every two weeks to pick up the drugs and brought it back to Waterloo to sell it for \$5000—a large profit if it was originally purchased for \$3000-\$3500. He never smoked it; he just picked it up, delivered it to the area dealers and pocketed the money.

Kickbush has seen a variety of drug users. In some cases they are controlled by the drugs to the point of not being able to take care of themselves, and in others the people involved just want to sit around and get high with their friends. That's the biggest difference Kickbush sees between the college students who get busted and the people like those in the trailer with no sewage.

Ames has a unique drug culture, different than the situations Kickbush and the task force see in places like Des Moines for two reasons. The first being that generally college students don't have enough money to start dealing drugs. Dealing marijuana is just like starting a

business—you have to put in money before you can get anything out. The other being the attitude students in Ames have toward marijuana is much more relaxed.

"We have this culture that thinks marijuana's not hurting anyone or anything ... People here just want to sit around, roll a joint and share it with their friends but they don't see how it affects everything," says Kickbush. "What they have to realize is that there is that percentage of society that's always going to be there. There are always going to be people that are selling other drugs, and some kids who say, 'Yeah, I'm going to try that.' Bam, that's it, they're hooked."

This fluctuation in marijuana users is what Kickbush says makes it difficult to legalize the drug. Some people, like most of the students Kickbush has picked up, are mature enough to handle the drug. They are going to school and want to be successful but they enjoy smoking a bowl with their friends after a long, stressful day. But then there is another side to it that Kickbush says those people don't see: The people who start using it and can't stop there; the ones that are constantly looking for a new drug, a new high.

"There are responsible people with [marijuana] ... there's lawyers, there's doctors, there's a lot of professional people that like to smoke marijuana and those people that can ... that's great for them ... But like I said you can't pass a law that benefits them because they're mature enough to handle it. How do we pass it for the people that can't?" explains Kickbush.

Underground Weed-Road

The doorbell rings and Molly is off the couch. She slowly opens the door, wipes her palms slick with nervous sweat on the leg of her jeans before taking the box from the mailman standing on the front stoop. The package is addressed to a name she has never heard, but she knows exactly what it is. The aroma of fresh coffee beans fills the basement, covering up what the box is really being used for. But Molly has specific instructions to leave it untouched until the next man arrives.

"[Drugs] move around in an underground network and everyone just helps each other ... People who use drugs have to trust each other, otherwise everything would just go to shit," says Ryan.

The network starts with a grower. Growers in export states, like Colorado and California, box up pounds of marijuana and send them to area dealers, like Chicago, Minneapolis and Omaha for example. Those dealers split their inventory into pounds and half pounds that go to smaller area dealers. Half pounds are then split into ounces to sell to dealers that will distribute eighths (about 3.5 grams) to buyers for personal use.

"It's all networking ... It's all about how much trust you can put in some people," says Molly. "It's kind of cool to see, [the network] reaches out really far, people don't even know where their weed starts"

This past summer, Molly played a key role in this trickle-down process. Her house would be the one to receive the packages that came from growers in Colorado or California. Twenty pounds of the drug were pushed out of her basement over the course of the summer. The weed was vacuum sealed and packed into boxes with coffee beans to cover up the smell and other items to vary the weight distribution of each box. The boxes were then labeled with a fake name and sent to Molly's house, this way as long as she didn't open the box she would be able to claim that the mail wasn't hers.

Then an area dealer would come in to open the boxes. Together, he and Molly would split the pounds and weigh out ounces of weed that would be sold to dealers in Ames who would then sell eighths bags to users.

"It's addicting because you can make a lot of money and it's all of a sudden like, woah, just one more run, just one more trip," Molly explains. "That's what happened this summer and it got dirty, but it always gets messy."

This may seem like the easiest job to have in the process, but living in the house that is hosting a big drug operation would land Molly in a lot of legal trouble. So when the dealer helping her distribute the weed thought his phone was tapped, she sold what was left and got out.

When Molly says messy she's referring to legal involvement. Making regular and frequent trips to Colorado and/or California combined with bringing large sums of cash to a bank raises suspicion with law enforcement.

Dealers have to work with all cash and for those making enough to raise suspicion, money laundering is required to keep their status on the down-low. Molly and Ryan, however, say this hasn't been a big concern for the student dealers they have been involved with. They say many of the dealers just try to break even when dealing

so they can smoke for free, while others try to make a profit but end up spending most of that cash on other drugs or entertainment. Only a small portion of what they make goes to the bank each week, not enough to be reported.

Growers in states where some form of marijuana is legal become the export states for the rest of the country. According to Kickbush, most of the marijuana found in the Ames area could be traced back to California until Colorado legalized medical marijuana two years ago. Now 90 percent of the marijuana they find is being tracked to Colorado, presumably because it's closer.

Once the laws are put into effect from this past election and Washington and Colorado are able to produce recreational marijuana, it is likely that the exports from those states will continue to grow, says Carolyn Tyler, communications director and public information officer at the Colorado Attorney General's Office.

Busted

A skunky smell creeps through the cracks of a door and fills the hall of a dorm building, making its way down to the Community Adviser's room. A phone call to the police is made immediately and within a matter of minutes the cops are knocking on the door. A search warrant has to be filed, but when the officers are back with it, someone will be arrested.

Lt. Elliott Florer of the ISU PD is one of the officers that responds to situations such as this one. Whether it's on- or off-campus two officers will go at a time, one to stay at the site and monitor the residents while the other goes to retrieve a warrant. One officer must stay to ensure that the residents do not attempt to destroy any evidence before the other officer has returned.

In the case of on-campus searches, the hall director is a key player. Buchanan Hall Director Michael Davis has had situations like this occur three times in his building during the fall 2012 semester. The outcome is always the same: someone is arrested and taken away.

One of Davis' most memorable drug arrests was a student who was denying that he had done anything wrong, forcing the police to retrieve a search warrant. While the student waited with the officer, he needed use the restroom and the officer had to go in there and watch him.

"It's an embarrassing situation. The students see them waiting with the officer in the hall or den and then they are arrested and have to come back to the dorm after it's all over," says Davis. "I try to keep the privacy for the resident. Yeah, they were smoking marijuana in the building but that doesn't make them a bad person. That doesn't mean we need to ridicule them."

After a student is caught they do come back to campus, but it's not necessarily all over. Every report the ISU PD files can be seen by the Dean

of Students office, which then calls in the drug and alcohol cases and deals with it on a university level.

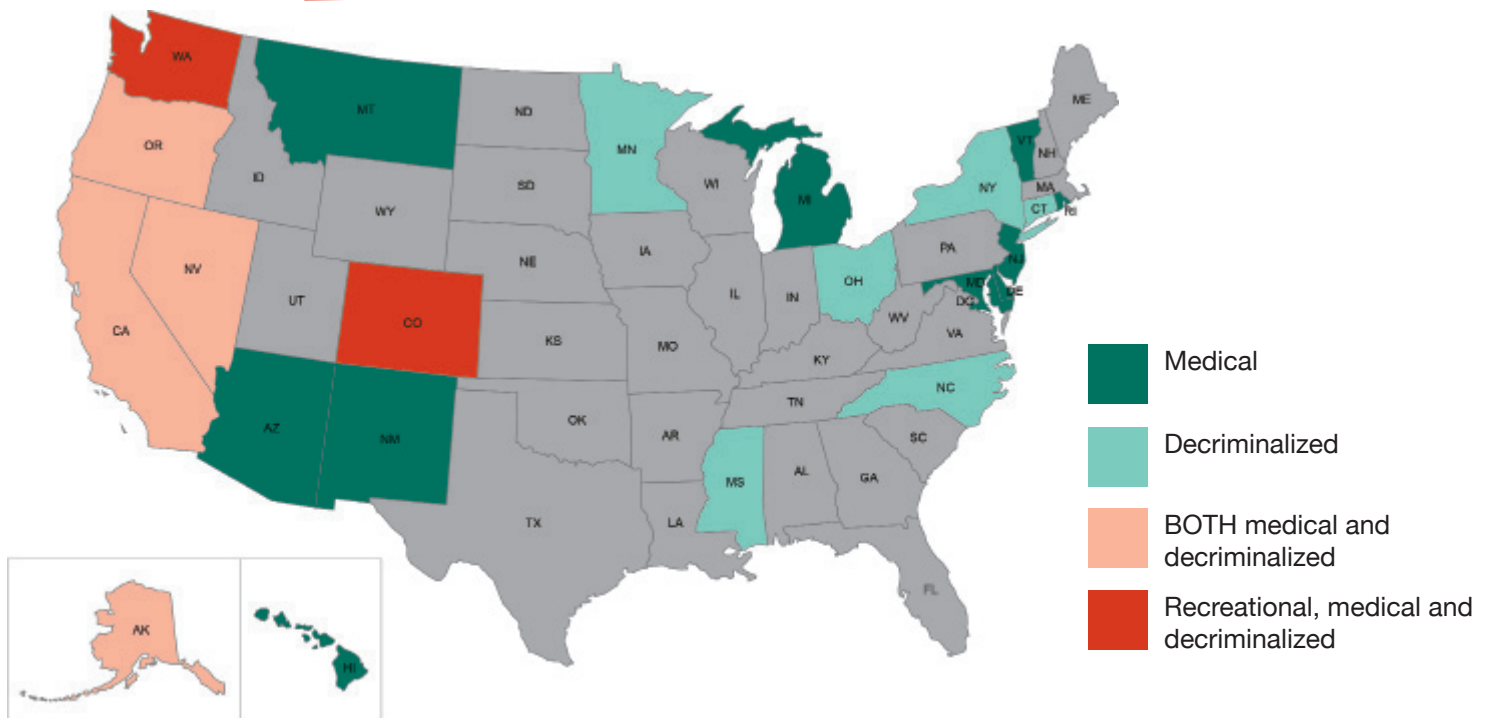
Assistant dean of students Michelle Boettcher explains the process like this: Every student that has been called in for marijuana possession has to have a hearing with the Dean of Students, even if they weren't charged with anything. The hearing is approached more as a conversation of what happened and then if the student is found guilty they decide on a punishment. For a possession, the consequence usually consists of a period of probation or disciplinary reprimand. In addition to the punishment, the student also has to undergo an assessment by student counseling if they haven't already done one through the state.

"We are just interested in them being responsible for their actions. We want to know what else is going on in their life, what resources we need to get them in connection with and get them protection if they need it from other people who might be affected by it," says Boettcher. "It feels punitive, but we want the experience to be an educational one, we want to provide them support."

If during the evaluation other issues or concerns are found, the Dean of Students office will put the student in contact with resources that can help them. This can be done through Student Counseling, Mary Greeley or substance abuse programs at places like Youth and Shelter Services.

It's the situations that do require extra help that makes Ryan push for the legalization of marijuana.

Where is marijuana legal in the United States?






"I think in general our drug policy is insane, even with drugs that are incredibly addictive, destructive and have negative health effects," explains Ryan. "Drug addiction is more a social disease than it is a crime; you can't punish people and get them to stop using drugs. A lot of times the people who are using really hard drugs feel like victims of the world they live in anyway, they are probably unhappy and sending someone to jail for drug use is really counterproductive, it just repeats the cycle."

That is at the heart of the issues YSS addresses. According to Jill Hill, treatment services associate director at YSS, they have group and individual counseling to help users get to the bottom of why the subjects are abusing.

"You can be physically and mentally addicted to THC and no one will agree with you," says Hill. "Do I think Iowa should move into [legalization]? No, not in the least bit ... [The legalization impacts us] greatly. Students want to come in here and argue and debate that it's not that bad for you ... I can't tell you the number of students who have made comments of, 'When I get out of school, I'm just moving to Colorado.'"

Hill sees ISU students using the services at YSS but hopes to be able to help more students in the future, with having a branch on campus for substance abuse programs and services being the ultimate goal.

As Molly finishes an episode of "Freaks and Geeks," she takes one last drag on the bowl she has been smoking. She puts the marijuana away, brushes her teeth and crawls into bed. She's going to need a good night's rest before her 6:30 a.m. wake up call for work and school the following day. 

drug dictionary

- Cornering** - Lighting one section of the bowl to prevent burning out the whole thing.
- Blunt** - Marijuana rolled into a cigar wrapper.
- Bong** - Type of water pipe that bubbles smoke through liquid to filter and cool before it reaches the user.
- Bowl** - Chamber where marijuana is packed on any smoking device.
- Bubbler** - A pipe with a water chamber beneath the bowl.
- Carb** - Hole found on pipes and bongs that must be covered while hitting the piece and uncovered to clear smoke from the chamber.
- Cherry** - Marijuana that is burning, making it red like a cherry.
- Edibles** - Baked goods containing THC.
- Greens** - The first hit of a freshly loaded bowl.
- Grinder** - A device used to grind marijuana buds for smoking.
- Joint** - Marijuana rolled into a cigarette paper.
- Marijuana** - Dried hemp plant that you smoke. Synonyms: cannabis, weed, ganja, pot, grass, hemp.
- Middle man** - Person who handles transactions between drug dealers and personal buyers.
- Tetrahydrocannabinol (THC)** - The chemical element that produces the "high" from marijuana.
- Twisted** - Being drunk and high simultaneously.
- Vaporizer** - Device that extracts active ingredients of plant material for human consumption to avoid toxic by-products.